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**A Point of Commonality:  
How the Wesleyan Concept of Perfection Connects to Sociobiology**

**Matthew Hill  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy  
Spring Arbor University**

## **Abstract:**

### **A Point of Commonality:**

#### **How the Wesleyan Concept of Perfection Connects to Sociobiology**

Wesleyan ethicists have a strong premise by which to engage people with no religious affiliation through emphasizing common ideas about the sociobiological possibility of altruism and the Wesleyan possibility of holiness. In recent years, new research in evolutionary biology and sociobiology has led to the knowledge that humans possess numerous behavioral traits that directly link to genetics. Yet, despite much innovative research in sociobiology, Wesleyan ethics is still coming to terms with what this new knowledge means for how one understands Christian perfection—namely, if Christians can attain holiness in this life, what happens to the individual's genetic makeup? Therefore, this paper finds itself at the intersection of Wesleyan ethics and the sciences and seeks, in part, to address how genetic explanations of altruism relate to theological accounts of holiness. To move toward an answer for this problem, the following concern must be considered: how are we to understand Wesleyan perfection against a background of evolutionary biology? Consequently, it is the central aim of this paper to explore how the commonality between sociobiology and Wesleyan ethics can help those within the Wesleyan tradition stay relevant and find harmony with recent scientific advancements. In this way, Wesleyans can better engage with persons and institutions outside of traditional Christian communities.

## Genetic Selfishness and its Implications for Wesleyan Ethics

The idea of genetic selfishness that became prevalent in the mid to late twentieth century should make Wesleyan ethicists pause; in fact, it is difficult to give assent to evolutionary theory and have knowledge of the Wesleyan concept of Christian perfection without experiencing some dissonance. This dissonance between sociobiology and Wesleyan ethics is rooted in the seemingly contradictory points of contention: Christian perfection and humanity's biological constraints. We would do well to note that this apparent dilemma is much like Wesley's attempt to wed a theology of original sin with a theology of Christian perfection. Nevertheless, Wesley reconciled such differences by means of the notion of prevenient grace.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it is my contention that grace is the solution to the dilemma of Christian perfection and constraints from human evolution (including selfish and selfless tendencies). After all, Christian perfection in Wesleyan thought, much like the restoration of original sin, is a means of grace just as justification or regeneration grace is.

To this end, there are three primary propositions we might make when attempting to provide a solution for how one may attain perfection *in this life* while still being bound by the same genetic code with which one is born. First, one might

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<sup>1</sup> There has been much debate over whether Wesley's concept of prevenient grace should be considered semipelagianism (a concept that avoids the heresy of Pelagianism without having to adopt a strict Augustinian approach to free will and grace). However, such a distinction is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, I will instead be using the concept of prevenient grace as Wesley formed it. For more on this discussion, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 219-26. Also, it should be noted that, concerning this concept of prevenient grace, Ken Collins articulates five attributes that benefit individuals in his *Theology of John Wesley*: the individual gains basic knowledge of the attributes of God; the individual gains a re-inscription of the moral law; the individual gains a conscience; the individual gains a measure of free will that is graciously restored; wickedness is restrained. See Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 78.

argue that the biological makeup of a person is *replaced* with a different genetic composition after the individual attains perfection. Such a proposition seems highly improbable since many scholars would see such a replacement as contrary to God's character. Because biological traits are permanent, at least to the extent that science can prove such, many Wesley scholars, such as Howard Snyder, assert that God works *within* creation and even creation's limits.<sup>2</sup> It would follow, then, that it is highly unlikely for God to simply replace genetics.

In fact, a total "replacement approach" raises important questions about whether the person who is redeemed is the same person as the one who was fallen. This problem leads to a cyclical conundrum. For instance, before justifying faith an individual is heavily influenced by her or his genetic inclinations. Working toward Christ and receiving grace from God can justify this individual. Yet, if the individual becomes a totally different person subsequent to her or his justification, either genetically or even "in essence," it would follow that the "justified person" is not the same individual as the one that was in need of justification. Do they now need to be justified again? Hence we can see a cyclical problem.

Another major problem with this replacement approach is that this splitting of the soul and body into distinct aspects of the person flirts with dualism. It bears certain relations to Gnosticism, which denies the goodness of the body.<sup>3</sup> In this heretical view, the Gnostic desires to escape from the captivity of the body, and genetic material is not something made wholly good by the Creator. In this way, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that much of the New Testament was working to combat Gnosticism. Paul took great pains to communicate the message that the body is good.

replacement approach leads to a slippery slope by which the fundamental doctrines of the Church—such as the resurrection, dual nature of Christ, and the virgin birth—are in jeopardy. If the body is merely something to *retreat from* and be ultimately *replaced by* a “perfected material essence,” then we are left with the incompatible ideas of a Creator God (who is active in the world as evidenced in the Old and New Testaments) who is materially absent from this new creation. Still another difficulty with the replacement approach rests in the following question: how can an individual whose denigrated genetic material, which has been replaced by some kind of suprascientific essence, ever fall from grace? If one is in a state of perfection that is not corrupted or even influenced by genetic material, it does not seem possible for the individual to change back to its previous state. Instead, it would be assumed that the replaced material would not be an influencing factor, but rather permanent; thus, once an individual attained perfection it would be everlasting.

The second proposition working toward the remedy of the sociobiology problem is directly tied to a dualistic/Gnostic interpretation: it is possible for the body to remain in a corrupt state of selfishness while the soul achieves Christian perfection in this life. If this proposition were correct, it would also have major implications for the orthodox theologies of the virgin birth, incarnation, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. One can assume that if the material body is still wholly intact, with genetic proclivities influencing an individual toward selfish behavior, then this material body would still have the same influence on the soul. For example, an individual with years of drug addiction whose soul is perfected must remain in the addicted body. It would make sense, then, that this material body,

with its chemical and genetic influences, would necessarily corrupt the state of the soul. There seems to be few valid arguments where the soul could be uninfluenced by the body if they remained parallel.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary materialists, such as Paul and Patricia Churchland, undoubtedly reject ideas of a parallel working of the body and soul, citing clear connections between the body and what some consider the soul.<sup>5</sup> For materialists, and many within the scientific community, the concept of the “soul” is itself called into question, and to say that the body and soul work in parallel would be a stretch. Moreover, ideas of parallelism would go against many in the theological community as well, showing clear ways God has decided to work *within* creation rather than parallel with it.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, the second proposition, the body and perfected Christian working in parallel, is also highly unlikely.<sup>7</sup>

And it is precisely because of the inadequacy of the first two explanations that another solution should be posited which does not reside in the dualism of the body and soul, yet satisfies the puzzle of Christian perfection and humanity’s biological makeup. It is thus in the third proposition where we may find a solution to our problem: through a combination of human choice and the grace of God,

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<sup>4</sup> This is due to the undoubted continuous interaction between the two.

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, in the first few pages of *Braintrust*, Patricia Churchland sets up a straw-man anecdote about the absurdity of God and morality—discussing medieval witch trials and the like. However, she makes very good points of the connectivity between the material body and what some consider the “soul” showing that we are, in fact, one entity. See Patricia S. Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> See again Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*. There are also numerous references from Scripture that expose God working *within* creation. One can easily find selections of hundreds of passages with a quick search. These passages range from the Genesis accounts of creation, to God using a flood as a form of justice, to the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Jesus. Most denominations in the Wesleyan tradition, in fact, have language in their books of discipline concerning an active God who is not only the “creator” but also the “sustainer” of the universe.

<sup>7</sup> One might also be able to argue that the opposite of parallelism would be an absent deist God who does not work within creation at all. Yet this notion would run contrary to much Christian scripture and Christian tradition. See previous footnote as an example.

humans possess the ability to “overcome”<sup>8</sup> their genes and achieve Christian perfection in this life. Such grace is much the same as prevenient grace as it works alongside the theological concepts of original sin, justifying, and regenerative grace, aiding the believer during and after the free conversion, and sanctifying grace working with Christians as they move toward perfection. In the same way, grace helps a believer achieve Christian perfection in this life. With the use of “overcome,” I mean to convey the connotation that it is a grace that helps one go beyond the limitations and propensities of one’s genes, a grace that allows one to overcome her or his constant proclivity toward selfishness. Through this process, human actions and choices are not determined by innate tendencies, passions, or biological predispositions.<sup>9</sup> Yet the genetic urges toward selfishness do not dissipate or go away; one merely has the grace to overcome the genetic urges and achieve Christian perfection.

In Wesleyan theology, an individual’s works are always a *response* to grace. One is never able to work hard enough to attain either justification or entire sanctification. Instead, just as prevenient grace beckons individuals toward a justifying Savior, so does this sanctifying grace call the Christian to respond to the Holy Spirit’s urgings. At some point, the individual becomes more influenced by the

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<sup>8</sup> After much deliberation, I have decided to use the word “overcome” to describe how a Christian can become perfect *in this life* without being determined by her or his biology. I recognize this word might seem to have limitations; yet I believe it embodies the heart of Christian perfection. A perfected Christian is not uninfluenced by biology, but, through the working of grace, is able to overcome the limits of biological influences. I choose the word “overcome” over the word “transcend” because I do not wish to convey the concept of “other worldliness” or even gnosticism. I also do not wish to convey the idea that the human has become something other than fully human. Instead, the word “overcome” captures the idea that, by the human will and the grace of God, one is not bound by genetic proclivities.

<sup>9</sup> To be clear, if it were the case that genes totally determined actions without free will, rather than merely predisposing actions, it would skew what we think about sin. Yet, there is no reason to believe that genes do totally determine actions.

Holy Spirit's persuasions than genetic proclivities, moving them further down the path of sanctification and ultimately enabling the individual to overcome those genetic constraints. To be clear, this is not some kind of dualism of the spiritual/material, but rather a portrait of God working *within* creation through grace, allowing humans to freely respond.

One might liken this phenomenon to having God on a rope. If one can imagine the moment of justification as the moment when the Christian becomes connected to God via a rope (in this allegory, the rope signifies grace). Through the Holy Spirit's urgings, the Christian can draw the rope inward, shortening the distance between the Christian and God (and ultimately entire sanctification). While the rope is always connected to the individual, the Christian can let out the rope—freely moving away from entire sanctification and rejecting grace—or take in the rope.<sup>10</sup> At some point, however, the Christian is so closely connected to God, that the rope does not have to connect the two. A Christian's works, then, is always a *response* to grace, where entire sanctification is unable to be earned when divorced from God's activity.

An analogy of a kite is another word-picture that can be helpful to the idea of how God's grace working with human freedom could allow someone to overcome genetic urges and constraints. In order to fly a kite, one is incredibly active: putting together the kite, clearing space for running and flying, checking for imperfections in

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<sup>10</sup> I have found this analogy, while unhelpful to some, to also be very helpful especially when trying to explain how a Christian might be able to "throw away" their salvation, but not "lose it." For instance, after justifying grace, the individual is connected with God. They may let out the rope to an extended distance, but are still attached, and thus not cannot "lose" their salvation (as one might lose a wallet or car keys). At some point, however, the individual might choose to untie oneself from God and throw the rope aside.



the tail or kite itself (etc.). Yet, flying a kite is impossible to do without wind. In this scenario, the wind is the active agent that allows an individual to fly the kite. All the good works of a Christian are only intelligible if they are working with the wind. Likewise, the works of a Christian are not enough if God is not active in the agent through his free-grace. Thus, a Wesleyan concept of Christian perfection can be compatible with current knowledge of sociobiology if we are to assume that God works with the Christian not to replace or work in parallel with genetic material, but rather to work within the total human context by providing the grace by which a Christian can overcome negative genetic constraints.

Wesley's holistic anthropology was also compatible with sociobiology.<sup>11</sup> He strove earnestly to reject dualism of the body/soul through his understanding of *theosis* and the restoration of the *imago Dei*. At first glance, it might seem as though Wesley distinguished between two dimensions of life, seeing humans as “embodied souls/spirits.”<sup>12</sup> Yet this was the prevailing theme of his day—not to mention the fact that sociobiology, neuroscience, and other salient sources of knowledge were not yet extant. Consequently, Wesley must be viewed in context, all the while noting Wesley's uncommon pushback against the dualism of his day. Despite the dualist's desire to separate the soul from the body, Wesley approached the issue by asking questions about how the soul was located *within* the body.<sup>13</sup> This distinction should not be considered slight; for, Wesley thought that God preserved some kind of

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<sup>11</sup> I took the idea of Wesley's “holistic anthropology” from Maddox's *Responsible Grace*. I also am indebted to Maddox for his thoughts within that section. See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 70-72.

<sup>12</sup> Today, the language of “embodied spirits” is used to make a holistic rather than dualistic point. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 71.

mysterious workings between the functions of the soul and brain.<sup>14</sup> Again, considering the time at which Wesley was situated in history, such an idea implies a significant connection of the soul to the body. As Maddox mentions, “[Wesley] rejected both a materialist reduction of this relationship and ...[a] reduction of all creaturely action to God’s immediate causation. For Wesley, both of these extremes discount the divine gift of liberty present in the human soul, and undercut the *responsibility* correlated with that *gracious* gift.”<sup>15</sup> Though Wesley may have believed the soul would survive after bodily death, he also clearly thought the soul would be re-embodied at the resurrection.<sup>16</sup> As Maddox rightly articulates: “So integral was the embodiment of the soul to him, in fact, that he occasionally advanced a distinction between ‘body’ and ‘flesh and blood’ which allowed him to assert that the soul was embodied by an ‘ethereal body’ even in its intermediate state. In short, while Wesley viewed the body and the soul as distinct realities, he did not view them as inappropriately conjoined.”<sup>17</sup> As Maddox goes on to say:

Some Greek portrayals of the body/soul relationship assigned the body a primitive, if not actively antagonistic, impact on spiritual life. By contrast, the Bible presents the body as part of God’s original good creation, and sin as a distortion of *every* dimension of human life. Wesley’s direct comments on this point typically side with Scripture: he decried the philosophical contempt of the body; rejecting any claim that matter was the source of evil; and argued that the biblical notion of sinful “flesh” did not refer to the body *per se*, but to the corruption of all dimensions of human nature.<sup>18</sup>

What is more, this care for both the body and the spirit was at the heart of Wesley’s understanding of *theosis* and was part of his holistic anthropology.

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<sup>14</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 71. Emphasis his.

<sup>16</sup> For multiple examples of this, see a list in Maddox’s *Responsible Grace*, Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 290 n.50.

<sup>17</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 72.

To give greater detail to Wesley's anthropology, Maddox says that Wesley captured the Eastern Orthodox distinction between the Image of God and the Likeness of God: "The proper enduring orientation of these affections would constitute the Christian tempers [or inward holiness] which is the Likeness of God."<sup>19</sup> Maddox notes "Wesley consistently identified inward holiness with Christian tempers."<sup>20</sup> These tempers would be the notion of being created in the image of God and living in God's likeness.<sup>21</sup> He finally ends his thoughts by noting that, "Overall, allowing for some dualistic influences, it seems fair to say that Wesley's two-dimensional anthropology did not degenerate into a strong metaphysical or ethical dualism. He sought, in his basic anthropological convictions, to emulate the holism of biblical teachings."<sup>22</sup> And it is this emphasis that caused Wesley not to divorce the earthly from the divine.

Along with addressing concerns about Wesley's anthropology, questions of agency might arise in regards to how a Christian actually overcomes the biological. Is God the causal agent in human Christian perfection or does human action play a central role? The answer may be similar to that which Paul proposes in Philippians 2:12-13 (NRSV) where he encourages those at the Church in Philippi to "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." If we hold that

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<sup>19</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 289 n.35.

<sup>21</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 72. It should be noted that Maddox continues with this caveat: "At the same time, it must be admitted that his valuation of bodiliness was not as positive, and his conception of the interrelationship of body and soul was not as integral and dynamic, as present theologians might desire." Yet, the progressive nature of Wesley's views for his time would suggest that he might be very sympathetic to the possibility that our bodies might influence our behavior.

salvation for Wesley was meant to encompass Christian perfection in this life, Wesley's commentary, called *Notes of the New Testament*, proves extremely revealing. In it, he articulates that, "Not for any merit of yours. Yet his influences are not to supersede, but to encourage, our own efforts. *Work out your own salvation*—Here is our duty. *For it is God that worketh in you*—Here is our encouragement. And O, what a glorious encouragement, to have the arm of Omnipotence stretched out for our support and our succour!"<sup>23</sup> According to Wesley, both God and humanity play a critical role in Christian perfection: God acting through grace and humans acting through volition of the will.

### **The Significant Role of *Theosis***

If humans are predisposed by their biological makeup, but do not necessarily have to act on those predispositions, then the idea of *theosis* can illuminate the intersection of sociobiology and Christian perfection. *Theosis* for Wesley is more pragmatic than it is esoteric, focused rather on what he thought potential for this life, as mentioned before.<sup>24</sup> And as sociobiologists have in no uncertain terms proclaimed, genetics *also* matter for this life.<sup>25</sup> Because Wesley held the Eastern Orthodox understanding of salvation to be the "the renewal of our souls after the

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<sup>23</sup> See John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 2 vols., vol. 2: Romans to Revelation (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1981). Emphasis his. See also sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" in John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, and Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1958), 506-13.

<sup>24</sup> Michael J. Christensen, 'Theosis and Sanctification: John Wesley's Reformulation of a Patristic Doctrine,' *Wesley Theological Journal* 31, no. 2 (1996), 80.

<sup>25</sup> If time and space had allowed, an interesting subject matter worth exploring would be what the intersection of *theosis*, genetics, and the "life to come." For instance, lions do not have the genetic proclivity to lie down with lambs.

image of God,"<sup>26</sup> this renewal could lead the Christian working toward salvation to overcome genes and achieve Christian perfection. As Randy Maddox states in

*Responsible Grace:*

For Wesley, then, the Spirit's work of sanctification was not merely a forensic declaration of how God will treat us (regardless of what we are in reality). Neither was it a matter of directly infusing virtues in Christian lives. It was a process of character-formation that is made possible by a restored participation of fallen humanity in the Divine life and power.<sup>27</sup>

This restoration of the *imago Dei* gives both the idea that human action is necessary along with divine intervention.

When considering the ways in which Wesley's understanding of perfection might coincide with what we know about the human biological makeup, it is important to note that he provided a few caveats concerning perfection, which help us frame how Christian perfection might work under the recent knowledge of our biological makeup. In "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," Wesley cites eleven ways perfection functions in this life, but in a unique way.<sup>28</sup> Below are the most pertinent statements (in italics) along with my commentary:

*(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.* This "absolute" that Wesley mentions seems to refer to humankind unaided by any grace from God.

*(5) It does not make a man infallible: None is infallible, while he remains in the body.* Wesley was concerned with critics confusing Christian perfection with "never making mistakes." This might support the claim that even while in a state of Christian perfection, a Christian is not practicing "perfectionism" and is still influenced by determined factors such as genes. Wesley's use of the phrase "while he remains in the body" should be understood in light of his holistic anthropology and his particular context.

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<sup>26</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 122.

<sup>28</sup> All of these statements are taken from "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" found in John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, and Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1958), 441-42. For a complete list, see Appendix II.

(6) *Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is "salvation from sin."* This statement would bolster the idea that, just as original sin remains but is overcome by prevenient grace, so those who are in a state of Christian perfection are not replacing genes but rather overcoming them.

(8) *It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.* Because Christian perfection was meant to be a restoration of the *imago Dei* in this life (not the life to come), it seems only logical that one could grow in grace even after reaching a state of perfection.

(9) *It is amissible, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this till five or six years ago.* Wesley provides a statement and an anecdote that shows the ability of one to lose Christian perfection. Much like the other works of grace (justification, regeneration, etc.), these states are not permanent. Rather, they perpetually hinge on the free will and actions of the Christian. By stating this, Wesley shows how Christian perfection is both a product of free will to be lost, *and* a grace to be freely given by God. Furthermore, what is unique about this statement is that it leaves open the possibility that biological proclivities might still hold sway over a Christian. Thus, genes are not being replaced by grace but are rather overcome through grace. Statements 10 and 11 also support this theory, claiming that perfection is a gradual process that leads up to an instantaneous moment of grace. Again, Wesley is trying to convey the idea that perfection is both human action and God ordained. And it is the human action that can succumb to the selfish biological tendencies still remaining in the human-Christian.<sup>29</sup>

It is worth mentioning that throughout the list, Wesley refers to justifying grace (along with other forms of grace) numerous times. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Wesley saw Christian perfection as yet another form of grace—maybe even the last grace in a Christian's life. Consequently, it would seem that this last grace of Christian perfection would be a reckoning of the fact that humans were originally made in a state of perfection and had fallen away.<sup>30</sup> As Outler suggests, "It is almost as if Wesley had read ἀγάπη [love] in the place of the Clementine γνῶσις

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<sup>29</sup> Certainly this concept of "perfection" is complicated and not without argument and interpretation—both in Wesley's day and ours. My hope in working through his statements is that the reader might see that evolutionary biology and the idea of Wesleyan Christian perfection are not incompatible.

<sup>30</sup> See sermon titled: "The Image of God" found in John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *Sermons 115-151* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 290-303. For commentary on this, see also Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 67.

[cognition], and then had turned the Eastern notion of a vertical scale of perfection into a genetic scale of development within historical existence.”<sup>31</sup>

One clear concept can be gathered from what we know of how Wesley thought of Christian perfection: it cannot be attained merely through a matter of the will. If reaching a state of perfection is just a matter of the will, biological constraints could make the achievement of such impossible for some, which would call the whole concept into question. So, for Wesley, the idea of divine grace is combined with human freedom, making the notion of perfection more probable; and it is owing to this combination that the idea that humans were created in a perfect state became the prevailing perspective in Wesleyan traditions.<sup>32</sup> In “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” Wesley states, “By salvation I mean, not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, *a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.*”<sup>33</sup> This restoration in the context of “salvation” cannot be assumed to happen without some kind of notion of grace. Thus, the Christian, by the grace of God, overcomes biological predispositions to be completely restored to the holistic perfection of pre-fallen humanity.<sup>34</sup> And it is only when the action of sin is dealt with by humans that

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<sup>31</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley: A Representative Collection of His Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 31.

<sup>32</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, and Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1958), 47. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> It should also be noted, that pre-fallen humans—though perfect as they were—still had the free will to fall from grace.

holiness can be attained.<sup>35</sup> This is why Wesley was so interested in constraining behavior with his accountability groups. As Wesley describes Adam's pre-fallen state in sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," we see a positive statement of human interaction with divine grace: "[Adam] was a creature capable of God, capable of knowing, loving and obeying his Creator. And in fact he did know God, did unfeignedly love and uniformly obey him. This was the supreme perfection of man, as it is of all intelligent beings—the continually seeing and loving and obeying the Father of the spirits of all flesh."<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

In this paper, I sought to articulate how one might understand Wesleyan perfection against a backdrop of evolutionary biology. John Wesley was driven to encourage his followers to become holy people. This quest for holiness was undergirded by his theological understanding of original sin and Christian perfection, leading directly to the shape and development of Methodist thought. Specifically, Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection points toward the process through which divine grace aids the individual to "overcome" biology, not to replace her or his biological makeup. This grace-dependent overcoming enables Christians not to be constrained by biological tendencies toward selfishness.

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<sup>35</sup> Wesley, Jackson, and Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, 38.

<sup>36</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *Sermons 34-70* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 439. Again, without completely adopting Eastern ideas of the fall, the Augustinian framework makes it a bit more difficult to understand contemporary research in sociobiology. To the degree that Wesley articulates the Eastern understanding of the fall and redemption, he ends up being more compatible with sociobiology. And to the degree Wesley follows the Augustinian concept of original sin, he remains more in tension with sociobiology.



Wesley thought that Christians had free will to choose good action, despite the many constraints placed on the individual (whether biological constraints or constraints from the fall). Yet he also saw God as being intimately involved in an individual's salvation journey. One can see this in the way he brings forth prevenient grace to help mitigate the potency of original sin. One can also notice the concept of grace and free will at work in concert in Wesleyan doctrines of justification, regeneration, and the process of sanctification. Thus, it would follow that Wesley viewed Christian perfection as both an endeavor of free will and divine grace.

With the Wesleyan understanding of the human condition being a combination of free will and divine grace, Christians in a state of perfection have not replaced their genes, nor is the individual living with the parallel of dualism where the body and the soul are functioning side by side as two distinct and separable entities. Instead, the Christian in a state of perfection has overcome her or his genes, not being totally constrained by the proclivities of her or his own biology, rather having her or his whole desire focused on God through grace in Christ. This overcoming does not mean that free will does not exist for the perfected Christian. On the contrary, the individual has the ability to retreat through her or his own volition, allowing her or his biological selfish tendencies to have dominance again. In this way, this concept of "overcoming" maintains a holism of body and soul, displaying how the Christian can remain completely in their body yet enacted upon by the divine grace of Christian perfection.

It is noteworthy that Wesley often used the phrase “Not as though I had already attained” to accompany discussions on Christian perfection.<sup>37</sup> While Wesley believed that Christian perfection could be attained, his caveat always ensured that a person was able to grow *more* in Christian perfection.<sup>38</sup> In sermon 120, “The Wedding Garment,” Wesley says, “In a word, holiness is having ‘the mind that was in Christ’ and ‘the walking as he walked.’”<sup>39</sup> And of the same subject he also proclaimed: “The sum of Christian perfection is all compromised in that one word, love.”<sup>40</sup> Wesley purposely defines holiness to show that there is always room for progress—even beyond perfection.<sup>41</sup> As Wesley continues, “So that how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace’ and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.”<sup>42</sup> This progression after entire sanctification is but another example that Christian perfection is only attainable through an overcoming of biological constraints—grace working with the confines of creation. And it is John Wesley’s theological understanding of the human person, influenced by both original sin and works of grace enabling perfection in this life, that lay the foundation for his accountability groups that move individuals toward a lifestyle of selflessness.

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<sup>37</sup> For some examples see: John Wesley and Rupert E. Davies, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 30-46. See also Wesley and Outler, *Sermons 34-70*, 96-124.

<sup>38</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 190.

<sup>39</sup> John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, and Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1958), 317.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson Works 6:413

<sup>41</sup> Marselle Moore, 'Development in Wesley's Thought on Sanctification and Perfection,' *Wesley Theological Journal* 20, no. 2 (1985), 35.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley and Outler, *John Wesley*, 258.

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